

A decorative border of black ink, featuring stylized leaves and vines that frame the central text.

*The
Improvement
of
Perfection*

William E. Barton D.D.

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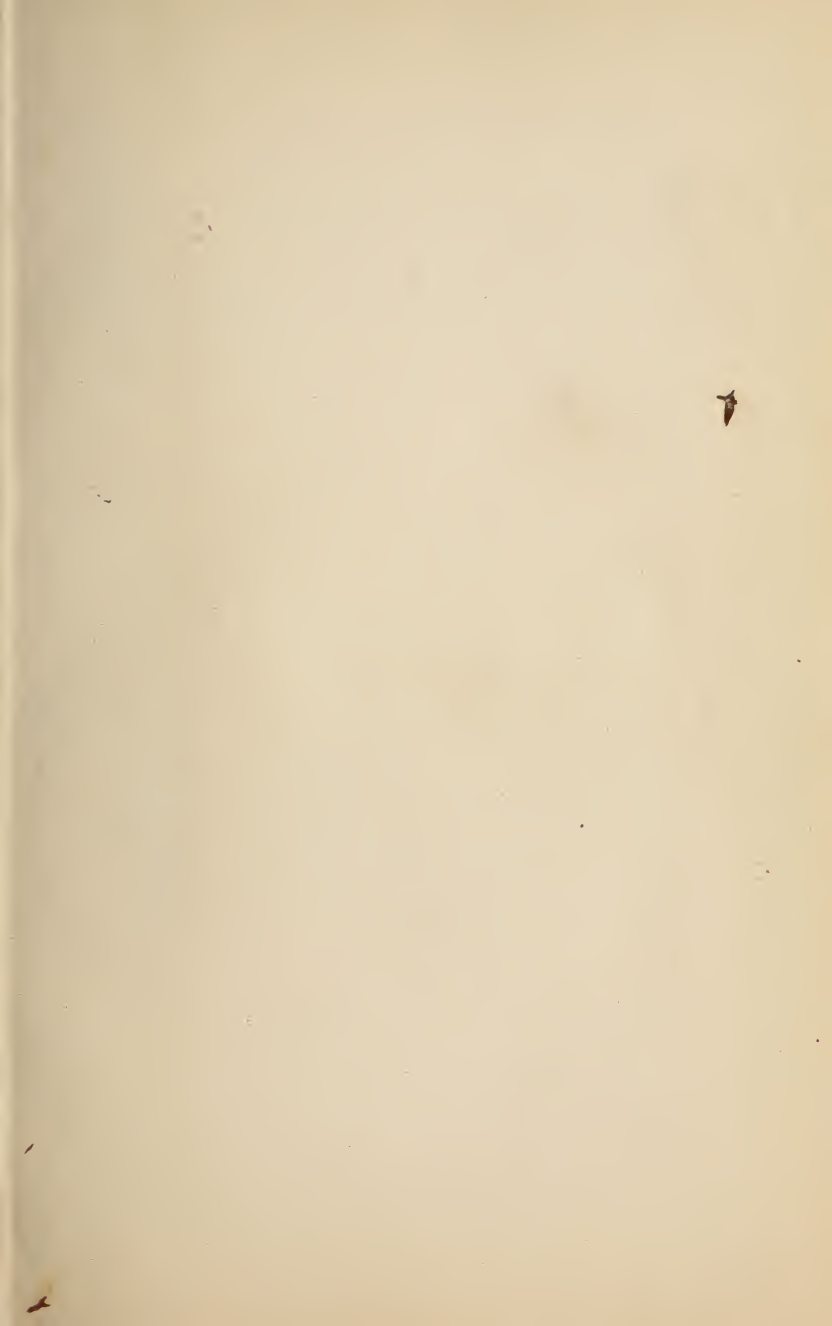
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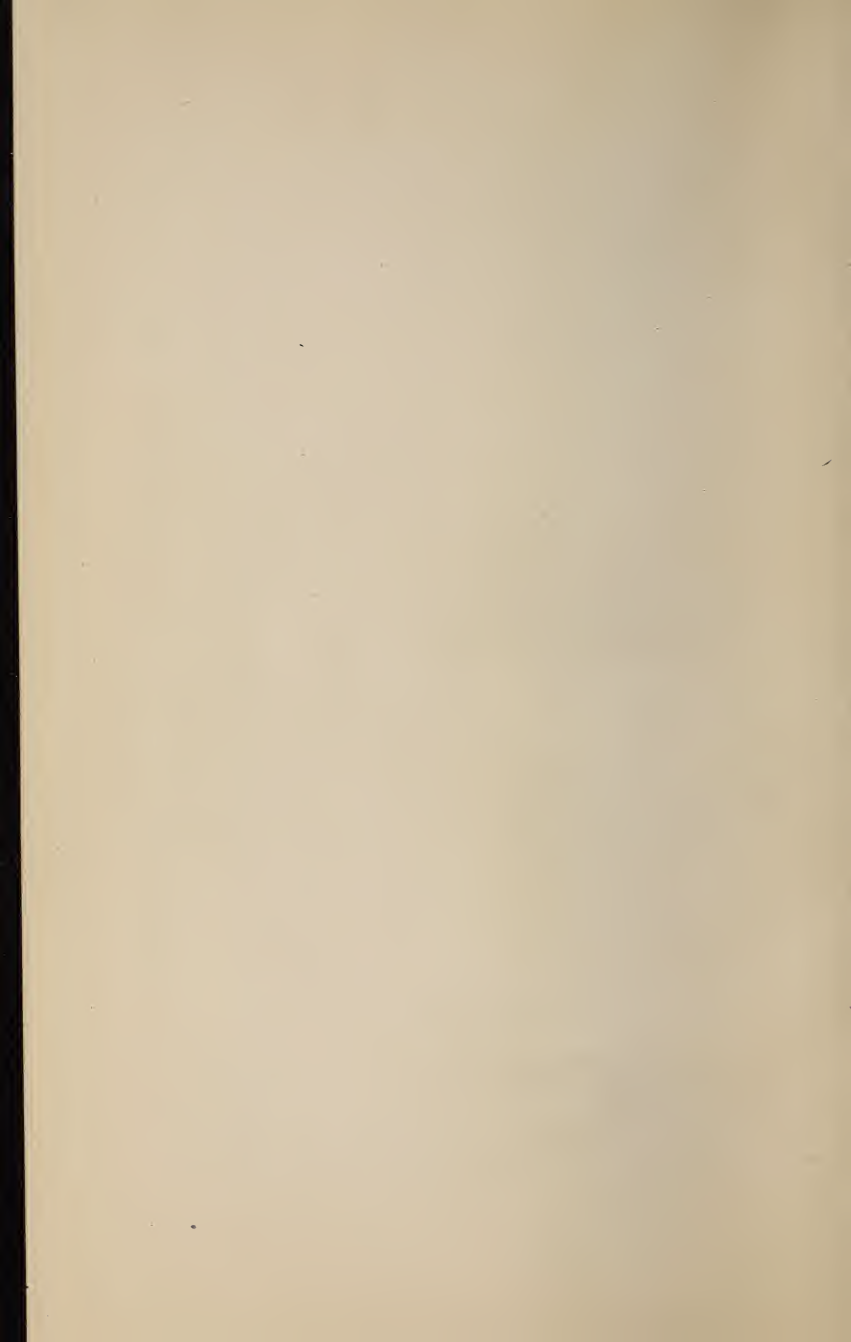
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The Improvement of Perfection

By

William E. Barton, D. D.,

Author of "The Psalms and Their Story," etc.



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TO MY DEAR FRIEND,
JAMES HARRIS FAIRCHILD, D. D.,
and to the memory of his brother,
EDWIN HENRY FAIRCHILD, D. D.,
MY HONORED TEACHERS



PREFACE.

THIS is no treatise on perfectionism, nor does it contain any doctrine unusual or strange. It is a simple talk with young people who are striving for a higher life, and is meant especially for those who are ready at the outset to lay it down, saying that the book is not for them, as they have no perfection to improve.

I have known some people who believed themselves perfect. I have known a somewhat smaller number whose friends believed them perfect. The two classes were distinct. Those whose friends thought them perfect were shocked when they learned it, and said that daily they had need to pray, "Forgive us our debts," and "Lead us not into temptation." The ones who thought themselves to have attained perfection could never persuade their friends to agree with them.

Nevertheless, there are many young Christians who are seeking a higher life, and there are more who ought to seek it. There is something unreal and fanciful to many of them in an effort to lift one's self into a higher spiritual level. This tiny book attempts to define the kind of perfection which is possible, and to furnish incentive to higher spiritual living.

May God bless the little book to those who read it.

W. E. B.

First Church Study,

Oak Park, Ill., March 5, 1900.

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THE IMPROVEMENT OF PERFECTION.

And these all, having had witness borne to them through their faith, received not the promise, God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.—*Heb.* 11 : 39, 40.

LIKE volcanic islands in midocean, lifting their heads above the waters that surround them, the names of the great men in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews tower above the sea of oblivion that has buried the memories of their contemporaries, and cast their light afar. It is a great, classic chapter, a literary masterpiece, a catalogue of the immortal names of the ancient world. There are one or two mild surprises in it, too; and they creep out in this concluding word. They suggest the title which I have chosen, which while antithetic is not wholly contradic-

tory, for perfection is cumulative and progressive. There are some lessons about it in this verse, and we may well try to find one or two of the truths which are suggested.

In the preface I have explained that this is no treatise on perfectionism, sanctification, or any of the technical terms by which different groups of Christians designate a special and definite religious experience apart from regular Christian growth. And let me hasten to say, what I must say again and again in these few pages, that I am using the term "perfection," not in the hard and narrow sense which is given to it in theological writing, but in the free and elastic sense in which the term is employed in the Bible.

I wish to speak of the influence of good men upon their own time, of their labor as a heritage to subsequent time, and of the impulse which a right conception should give us of their work and God's as related to ours. The titles which I have chosen are selected with reference to the declaration of the author of this

epistle "that apart from us they should not be made perfect." I write, therefore, of the kind of perfection which they had in themselves, of that which their work has since attained, and that which it may attain with our effort joined to theirs.

PART I.

IMPERFECT PERFECTION.

Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright.—
Ps. 37 : 37.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, . . . a perfect and an upright man?—*Job* 1 : 8.

Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded : and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.—*Phil.* 3 : 15.

“Great truths are portions of the soul of man ;
Great souls are portions of eternity.”

—*Lowell.*

“Fain would I say, ‘Forgive my foul offence !’
Fain promise never more to disobey ;
But, should my Author health again dispense,
Again I might desert fair Virtue’s way,
Again in Folly’s path might go astray,
Again exalt the brute and sink the man ;
Then how should I for heavenly mercy pray,
Who act so counter heavenly mercy’s plan,
Who sin so oft have mourned, yet to tempta-
tion ran ?”

—*Burns.*

“If I have taken the common clay,
And wrought it cunningly,
In the shape of a god that was digged a clod,
The greater honor to me.”

“If thou hast taken the common clay
And thy hands be not free
From the taint of the soil, thou hast made
thy spoil,
The greater shame to thee.”

—*Kipling.*

“Strength alone knows conflict. Weakness is below even defeat, and is born vanquished.”—*Madame Swetchine.*



IMPERFECT PERFECTION.

I. *The Flexibility of Language.*



COUNT it not a mere trick in the use of words. Language is flexible, and word-meanings are not the hard and fast things which we sometimes essay to make them. If the Bible could have been killed, it would have died long ago through the effort of its friends, as well as its enemies, to nail its coffin-lid with hard and fast definitions of words most variously used. Who has not heard a devout believer holding science by the throat, and pounding its assertion that the earth was created in long periods, with the declaration that the Bible's use of the word "day" must be uniform? And what word has come so readily to the tongue of the sceptic as this, that the Bible calls imperfect men perfect, and instances David as a man after God's own heart?

I have put together perfection and imperfection in the title that we may face this point squarely. For this text says that these men did not become perfect, and there are other places in the Bible in which perfection of one sort or another is affirmed of some of them. In accord with these other and various commendations of Noah, Abraham, David, and other sinful men here mentioned, whose character is strongly commended in other places, let me affirm that they did attain a certain sort of perfection. They served their own ages with such devotion and earnestness as to claim a place in this list of those who helped the world along toward the perfection which is God's goal, and, to do this, they required and had in them some of the raw material of perfection.

Now, it is in a sense something like this that the Bible calls any man perfect, and it is a proper use of language. Indeed, as I shall presently show, it is the only way in which we can affirm perfection of anything save God himself.

II. *An Appeal to Fairness.*

But first let me pause to say that I like it little that the Bible should be quoted unfairly against itself in the proving of imperfection in the men whom it commends. If the Bible commended their characters without reservation, and men had found out their sins in some other way; if the Bible had told us of God's approval, and some uncovered tablet or papyrus enabled us to prove their human frailties; then we might cast back into the teeth of the Bible the declaration that Job was a perfect man, and that Abraham was the father of the faithful, and David a man after God's own heart. But inasmuch as the same Bible which thus commends these men tells us honestly of their faults, and how God rebuked them, tearing the royal purple from the king, and setting him down in sackcloth till his breaking heart cried out for mercy, inasmuch as to the honesty of the Bible we are indebted for material to convict it thus (if we do convict it) of a false idea of perfection, I declare in the

name of simple fairness that the method is dishonest and unfair.

I am no apologist for the errors of these men. I am perfectly willing to admit them. They were sins to them and according to the standards of their own day; they would be still greater sins according to our present standards. Those present standards are what they are in part because of the work of these same men, but I will not plead this in their favor. I will simply insist that it shall be remembered that the same Bible that gives them credit for their perfection, such as it was, convicts and condemns them, kindly but sternly, for their imperfections. And as the Bible thus gives us both sides of these characters, I count it not a wrong use of language to use this antithetic title. I shall not speak of these or any other men as perfect, except in a sense such as this, which admits their imperfections. I shall not dwell upon their faults; others, delighting in the task, have made it superfluous for me; neither shall I excuse them.

III. *Perfection in Nature.*

God calls his work good. He has never called it complete. Those good people invert the teaching of Scripture who premise a perfect creation with subsequent deterioration. First was not the spiritual and after that the natural, but the reverse; and the climb has been long and slow. God calls his work good at every creative stage, then treats it as raw material, and works it over. He has given us no illustration of his power to make something out of nothing. Nature has few types, and remodels them, inconveniently sometimes, and imperfectly at best.

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene” we read about, but among them there is not a perfect one. From the Koh-i-noor that flashes on the breast of Victoria down, they are all imperfect. If we cannot see it, it is because our sight or our instruments are too imperfect to detect the imperfection which we know exists.

The wing of the bird is wonderful, but

the maker of scientific kites does not follow its pattern, much as its mechanism suggests to him, and glad as he would be to make a kite that could fly as well. He will tell you, and truly, that the bird's wing is an imperfect organ of flight. The hoof of the horse is the most perfect of all nature's foot-making for purposes of speed, but the veterinary will tell you of its manifest imperfections. The human eye is wonderful, but it is not perfect. They have ceased, almost, to discover new stars with the telescope, because they can make a camera that in three respects excels the eye: it has a finer lens, that can find stars where the eye cannot; it can endure without winking or fatigue a whole night's study of a single spot in the heavens; and it records accurately what it sees, while the eye depends upon the inaccuracy and uncertainty of memory. But the knowledge of the imperfections of the eye does not make the optician despise it. The ability to grind a finer lens does not cause him to have contempt for the eye itself. Nay,

he would give all his skill ten times over to be able to make an eye, though it had ten times as many imperfections as it has.

Not only so, but, recognizing a relative perfection in each of these things, we readily accommodate our language to the fact, and speak of the eye of the eagle, the hoof of the horse, the wing of the bird, as perfect in their adaptation to their needs. And such a use of language is correct, unless we are to eliminate the term altogether, or use it only of God.

IV. *Perfection in Human Workmanship.*

What do we mean when we speak of any human work as perfect? A teacher returns a composition to a boy, marked one hundred per cent. That does not mean that the lad of twelve has spoken the last word that can ever be said on the subject which he has chosen. The encyclopædias will not immediately get out new editions to include the results of his thinking. He has made no important contribution to human knowledge. But he has read well the few references

given him, and has thought the subject over enough to make the thought his own and express it in his own words. He has been careful not to blot his paper, and has avoided the words which he could not spell. He has been painstaking and conscientious, and, judged by the standard of what may reasonably be expected from such a boy, he has done his work perfectly, and may go and play with a light heart and a consciousness of having done well. . . . Some day he will read that composition again, and smile over it.

Thus, when I speak of Gray's *Elegy* as the most perfect of English poems, of the *Venus de Milo* as a perfect type of female beauty, of St. Paul's as the perfection of Christopher Wren's genius, of Edison as having perfected the phonograph, or of Addison's perfect mastery of English prose style, I use the term "perfect" or "perfection" in a way that people have learned to understand, and in a way that is perfectly fair,—and there I have used the word "perfectly" again.

V. Judging by the Best.

Let me say further that all such use of the word implies the judging by what is best. Let me drop the word "perfection," lest it become tedious. When I speak of Tennyson as a master of rhythm, I do not forget his occasional lapses. When I call Browning a mighty poet, I do not forget some shockingly bad rhymes. I do not pretend that every work of Millet's was an "Angelus" or a "Man with the Hoe." The world still judges an artist by his best. I have known a man to be made or marred by an accidental stroke of genius, according as the world read a like genius into all his other work, or condemned it unsparingly, though it had elements of power, because it lacked the master touch. In either case it showed the world's standard of judging. It judges Wellington by Waterloo, and not by his minor victories, much less by his defeats.

Now it is right that the heroes of ancient time should be so judged. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews brings

them all to the test of faith, and finds them to endure it. Incidentally he brings to light almost ever other virtue; but this is the one thing which he claims for them, that they exhibited that quality of reliance on God which made them worthy the love of God and the honor of men. And that is what still may be claimed for them.

VI. *Perfection in Blossom and in Fruit.*

If to this it be objected that, while this is true, it falls short of our hard, matter-of-fact, unimaginative, Occidental use of language, and is not in our modern sense perfection, I must admit the fact from the point of view of that definition, and say that that is the only sort of human perfection about which I know anything.

True, perfection is possible. That is, it is possible at any moment for any man to do the whole will of God as he understands it. His understanding is defective, and to that understanding God's will is accommodated. And so it is pos-

sible for him to do it perfectly. I doubt not there are moments, perhaps hours, may be days, when by the grace of God he so does it, and so far forth his life is one of perfect obedience. Such moments, such days, these old heroes had; and I am willing to call that perfection,—a perfection which has its limitations, but was still perfection.

When I say that an apple blossom is a perfect flower, I mean that it has five beautifully tinted, regular petals, a five-chambered pistil, and stamens which number a multiple of five. I also mean that the whole impresses me as beautiful, fragrant, symmetrical. I do not mean that it is good to eat, nor shall I mean that till the fruit is ripe. If the county fair occurs before the period for the ripening of this particular kind of apples, I may exhibit the green fruit, and perchance bring home a blue ribbon upon it. The fruit is hard, green, bitter, and would make me ill if I ate it; but the judges, knowing its time to ripen, and judging its progress accordingly, called it perfect

fruit. Such was the perfection of the best of Old Testament saints, and in their best moods and moments. When dominated by the best that was in them, they had the perfection of the flower, the perfection of the unripe fruit; they "received not the promise" of complete fruition.

So let us have done with quibbling about language, and the meanings, various and elastic, which may be covered by one word. A little imagination and a little common sense would have done away with half our commentaries. For why should books be written for the stupidity or wilful carelessness of those who object that the Bible both tells us to "bear one another's burdens," and that "every man must bear his own burden"; to "answer not a fool according to his folly," and to "answer a fool according to his folly," that certain men "obtained promises" by their faith, yet lived on faith because they "obtained not the promise"; and that God gave credit for the meagre and latent elements of perfection in the

lives of imperfect men, judging them often by their aspiration rather than their attainment, and counting their faith for righteousness, which indeed it was?

Let us thank God for every element of perfectness that has entered into human life, and honor the name of every man or woman who laid hold on it and transmitted it, however far short they came of a realization of all its graces.

PART II.

CHARACTER'S EARNED INCREMENT.

Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.—1 *Cor.* 10 : 11.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.—*Heb.* 11 : 13.

“ I am owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars, and the solar year ;
Of Cæsar’s hand and Plato’s brain,
The Lord Christ’s heart, and Shakespeare’s strain.”

—*Emerson.*

“ So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When Duty whispers low, ‘Thou must,’
The youth replies, ‘I can !’ ”

—*Emerson.*

“There is no life so humble that, if it be true and genuinely human and obedient to God, it may not hope to shed some of his light. There is no life so meagre that the greatest and wisest of us can afford to despise it. We cannot know at what moment it may flash forth with the life of God.”—*Phillips Brooks.*



CHARACTER'S EARNED INCREMENT.

I. *The Par Value of a Life.*

THAT they . . . should not be made perfect." Yet their lives have grown in honor and in their moral value to the world. I have spoken of the fact that they served their own times well as a proof of their worthiness. Every life must come to that test, and that constitutes its initial value. To put the thought in commercial language, I might say that the par value of every life is the value of the service which that life renders to its own age. But that is not its whole value. Some lives are below par a week after the funeral: others being dead still speak, and the whisper of their initial utterance swells to an anthem that echoes down the centuries.

II. *Life's Compound Interest.*

He would greatly err who might suppose that the only value of a life is that of the impression which it makes upon its own age. Judged thus, Cromwell is a traitor and Homer a straggling beggar.

“Seven cities strove for Homer dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.”

Epictetus and Æsop had their value, not the one as a philosopher and the other as an interpreter of the soul of voiceless things, but their market value as slaves. History has no sadder tragedies than those which illustrate this post-mortem revaluation of the world's heroes. We should go far wide of the truth if we judged men with the judgment of their own age. The cross which gilds the highest spires of Christendom to-day but illustrates in the person of the world's greatest Character what has proved true of many of her great characters, that a man's own age often fails to value him at his real worth.

Now, what is the value to the world

of a character like that of Abraham? To his own age he was the somewhat erratic but prosperous sheik who, because he sought better pasturage for his flocks, or for some less valid reason (as the world estimated it), went out from his home and founded a new nation and a new religion. He was a capitalist, an apostate, a lucky fellow, a fanatic, an honest man, a good fighter, or something better or worse than any of these, according to the standpoint of those who judged him. What is he to us? He is the ancient world's early and concrete exponent of faith in God and duty, that caused him to go forth homeless but hopeful, friendless, but the friend of God. He did not fail under the supreme test. He failed in minor tests,—let me say it again, and if need be for the hundredth time,—but he did not fail in this supreme test. Handel was a glutton, if you please to remember it; but it is not by his gluttony I judge him when the "Hallelujah Chorus" opens the gates of heaven to a worshipful soul, and makes him hear the

very praises about the Throne. And Handel's life is worth to me, not the value of his patronage of the coffee-house, but the value of his abiding genius and inspiration. That is what I call the compound interest of a faithful life. The value which it has to any single life is eternal increment, and the power of the life to give help to other lives is increased thereby.

III. *Character Begets Character.*

It is other life that inspires us. It is character that begets character. We grow like what we contemplate. We are the sum of all the lives that have helped or hindered us, plus our own individuality, and that is a part of the lives that we have helped to make or mar.

Have you not read of the pebble in the middle of the lake, whose ripples reach the farther shore? It displaces, in the first instance, a cubic inch of water, perhaps; but miles of water respond to its impulse ere its last widened ripple dies

away on some far-distant coast. So life impels, inspires life. And the influence of a life widens and deepens. If Abraham's fidelity has made you more faithful, then Abraham's life lives itself over in you, and you are a child of him who is thus proved again to be "the father of the faithful." What a progeny this has thus become! If his children according to the flesh are as the leaves of the trees, his seed according to the spirit are as the sand upon the seashore!

How many ancestors a man has! You have been wondering whether you were eligible for admission to the Sons or Daughters of the Revolution, and were surprised to find how many ancestors belong to every man. A million and a half, or thereabout, I believe, belong to the twentieth generation. There is room, then, in my life for something good to have been derived from an almost infinite number of the great lives of earth. All things are mine. Adam, with his sin, is not my only ancestor! Abraham's faith, Joseph's chastity, Job's integrity,—all

are mine, and by the laws of spiritual heredity!

IV. . *One Life at Par and at a Premium.*

But, lest the thought of my wealth in this inheritance cause me to forget the integral value of each of these lives, let me stop a moment and compare their value as I see it in one life of which I happen to know a little.

I am sorry that I do not know more about the life which I am to tell about. All that I positively know I read in one of the Chicago papers a few weeks ago. I paid it the compliment of forgetting the man's name. That is because, thank God, such deeds are not so very rare. The paper told about it in four or five inches of space. I read about it, and turned the paper for something else, and left the paper in the street-car when I got out. But I thought about it afterward, and so shall you.

Although I did not know this man, I have known others like him. From their

lives let me supply a little detail about his. His name was Tom or Mike or Pat, and his par value was a dollar and a half a day. He wore blue overalls, and smoked a stubby clay pipe. And, having been faithful as a spike-driver, and being no longer able to continue work so arduous, the company employed him to tend a crossing. They looked at his record first, and found that he had not got so drunk upon his wages Saturday night as to fail to appear for work on Monday. They judged him faithful; ay, and, thank God, they found him so!

I have seen him, or others like him, as the train whizzed by, and he did not look like a hero. But he was.

So much I have supplied. Now for what I read. No farther away than Chicago, no longer ago than a few months since, this man stood out to signal the fast express that the crossing was clear. Waving his flag till the train came near, he turned to let it pass, just as a tiny little girl came toddling down upon the track from the opposite side.

There was no time to stop the train. There was no time to catch the child and get away.

Now, all the years that this man had worked, earning his dollar and a half a day at commonplace and monotonous labor, there had grown up in his soul an ideal of duty, to which he adjusted the simple habits of his daily task. And a thousand times he had thought of what that ideal of duty might compel ; but the years went by, and no great occasion had come. He had waved his red flag, or his white flag, or his green flag, and had done nothing more heroic than to help a timid old woman over the crossing. But now, in that instant of mortal danger, the ideal stood out clean-cut as a cameo, nor did the smoke or roar of the train dim its outlines or silence its imperative command. He shouted to the child ; but she did not hear, or, if she heard, she did not heed. Even as he shouted he was running, for he knew what he must do. He met her on the track amid the shriek of the whistle and the grind of the air-

brakes that could not avail. And in the instant that the engine was dashing him to death, he was throwing, and did throw, that little girl off the track and away from danger.

Nay, nay! It was not in the tales of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table that I read this. This splendid, intrepid act occurred but a few days ago. Hats off for my knight in blue overalls! And above the grave that may never know a monument, or, if it has a simple stone above it, will bear but the name that was never in print but once, and then only to be forgotten, pay your tribute of honor to my hero in every-day clothes!

The par value of that life was a dollar and a half a day! But the real value, the moral value, of that life, is that sum plus all its helpful influence upon your life and mine.

When I read of a deed like this, I feel that, if God should honor me some time by making me a crossing-tender, perhaps by the grace of God and the help of this

man's example, I might do the same that he did. And if I never have occasion to serve God and my fellow-men in that particular station, still, by this splendid, knightly deed, which glorifies not simply this one man, but every faithful man of his class whose life contains the raw material for a hero, I may tend my own crossing in life, which is of another sort, indeed, but which requires the same devotion, with like fidelity to his.

And so I add to my thought of the perfection—such as it was—attained by these men, this element which time had computed and compounded, which, together with what they wrought on earth, gives me the aggregate value of their lives and their struggle toward perfection.

V. *Recapitulation.*

Be not afraid of recapitulations. Daniel Webster used to repeat each proposition in his plea as many times as there were men in the jury, and a book must say the same thing over in as many different ways as there are classes of readers.

This, then, is the sum of what has been said thus far: that these Old Testament worthies served their own ages so faithfully and well as to give to their lives a then present and intrinsic worth not to be lightly spoken against, though it co-existed with many and obvious imperfections; but that, added to this, is another worth, accumulated through long ages, to which the influence of these lives in all subsequent generations has made substantial increment.

These men were accumulators of good, sharers of it, and depositors of it. Their names have become synonyms for the graces which they exemplify. This is the charm of biography. This is the reason why we have so much of it in the Bible, the biography of men faulty and imperfect, but striving toward a perfection which has helped to shape the world's ideal of perfection.

A great name is God's most fecund creation. Its progeny continues to a thousand generations. Thus Abel, not one of whose words is recorded, still

speaks. Thus the victories of those who stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, and out of weakness were made strong, recur in every generation. Their shouts of victory resound anew in the conquests of every age over passion, folly, and shame. Their life-work goes on in an ever perfecting perfection, wrought partly out of their own lives, and partly out of the legacy which they have bequeathed to the world.

PART III.

CUMULATIVE PERFECTION.

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.—*Phil.* 3 : 12.

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only [the creation] but ourselves, also, which have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our bodies.—*Rom.* 8 : 22, 23.

Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ, for his body's sake, which is the church.—*Col.* 1 : 24.

“ Lord, who thy thousand years doth wait
To work the thousandth part
Of thy vast plan, for us create,
With zeal a patient heart ! ”

—*Newman.*

“ God has made all good work dependent upon other good work for its beginning and its completion. He has made it impossible for any man to point to any good thing, and say, ‘ I did it. ’ ”—*W. G. Frost, D. D.*

“ Not free, what proof could they have given sincere
Of true allegiance, constant faith and love,
Where only what they needs must do appeared,
Nor what they would? What praise could they
receive?

What pleasure I from such obedience paid
When will and reason (reason also is choice),
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
Made passive, both, had served necessity,
Not me? ”

—*Milton.*

“ Finish then thy new creation,
Pure, unspotted may we be ;
Let us see our full salvation
Perfectly revealed by thee.
Changed from glory into glory
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise. ”

—*Charles Wesley.*



CUMULATIVE PERFECTION.

I. *Perfection as Personal.*

WE have talked about perfection as though it were a personal possession. There is an element of truth in it. Paul freely conceded that there were some Christians among those to whom he wrote, whose advancement in the Christian life made it appropriate or courteous for him to speak of them as perfect. He, who does not claim perfection, but distinctly disavows it, however, does not consider them so much above him but that he gives them advice, which is to do just what he is doing, "Let us, then, as many as be perfect, be thus minded," i. e., forget the perfection which they have attained and press forward. So let us forget the perfection about which we have been talking, which is personal, and

talk of that which is co-operative. For that is the kind about which the author of this epistle is talking.

II. *Co-operative Perfection.*

One of the surprising things about this eleventh chapter of Hebrews is the way in which it ends. It would be perfectly true to say that so far have these ancient worthies influenced us that "we apart from them have not been made perfect," and that for this reason God "provided some better thing concerning us" than to have lived before them, and hence devoid of their inspiring example. But he does not say that our perfection, such as it is, is the result of theirs, true as that would have been, but that their perfection depends upon ours.

Now we are getting down to the roots of things. If a personal perfection be in any sense hopeless, and if the claim to have attained it be the result of morbid introspection, then at least we may hope to claim a share in coöperative perfection, cumulative perfection. And this is

an illustration of the three things which I am talking about: 'The Pilgrim Fathers did a work which was worth doing for its own sake; they did a work which has been an inspiration to the world for nearly three centuries; but the supreme value of it all appears in the fruition of their beginnings in the national life of to-day. Their work had its intrinsic value, its increment in the example which they left, and its complement in the labor of others who have builded upon their foundation. They themselves realized that the third was the highest value of their toil, and recorded their willingness to give their own lives to that end, "yea, though they should be unto others but as stepping-stones, for ye performing of so great a work." Ah, but that was a prophetic word!

III. *Some Things That Have Been Perfected.*

There are some things that have been perfected. Kepler's laws, for instance, are final. We have ceased to expect fu-

ture discoveries to change them. But astronomers from Ptolemy and even before had been working on the same problems, and Kepler's own teacher after years of labor bequeathed these problems to him with his own approach to a solution. The ancient astronomers without Kepler were not made perfect. Nay, contradictory as were their theories, Ptolemy without Copernicus was not made perfect. The alchemists labored long after the universal solvent and the power to turn all metals to gold. Hundreds of the wisest men of earth gave their lives to this problem. They received not the promise; they died, for the most part, with little gold. But our chemistry grew out of their effort. God provided some better thing than that they should have found what they were seeking.

“And herein is that saying true, One soweth and another reapeth.” For verily, we are all reaping what the past has sown. And, what is more, every reaper carries both sickle and seed-bag, or while

he reaps scatters handfuls of purpose, which are the world's future harvest.

God is patient. He is almost prodigal of time. He has never hurried, but he has ever his harvesting and re-seeding; and they go on together in the world.

IV. *The World in Process of Perfecting.*

The principle is the same as applied to things in progress of perfecting, which includes practically the world. I spoke of the Pilgrim Fathers. The Mayflower Compact without the Constitution of the United States was not made perfect. The Declaration of Independence without the Emancipation Proclamation was not made perfect. Nay, lest we should so readily pair our beginnings and completings of individual attainments, God has linked them together and intertwined them in such a manner that it may be truly said that Magna Charta will not have wrought out its final and logical result till the blessings of Anglo-Saxon civilization shall have wrought out a larger freedom for all men.

Now, indeed, we begin to understand the elements of possible perfection in the imperfection of the older things. The blank and staring voids in their attainment are built into in part, and in other part are arched over, by the attainments of those who followed them, and these also left their own blank spaces, yet withal laid a good foundation for our building.

Now in the rush of the locomotive and the steady throb of the ocean steamer's piston I see the approach to perfection of what a certain lad once saw afar off, but embraced and was persuaded of, when he noticed the steam lifting the lid of the kettle. Now in the whirl of the electric car, the blaze of the arc-light, and the world-belting flash of the telegraph, I see the process of perfecting what was contained in the spark which Franklin received into his knuckle. And, if I am not mistaken, I have hit upon God's customary method of working.

Is, then, the new the enemy of the old? God forbid. Nay, the new is the fulfil-

ling of the old. The worst enemies of the Old Testament are not the believers in the New, but the believers in the Old alone. Now I understand why Jesus would not put new wine into old bottles, and why he opposed those whose axiom was, "The old is better." Men still quote it, and quote it as if he had added his authority to it, but he opposed it. There is ever a new theology which men cry out against as revolutionary, but it is the fulfilling of the old. There is ever the rise of some new political doctrine, which is looked at askance and which at length triumphs; and in its triumph the historian sees, what the men of that generation never see, the triumph of what had long been striven for. And so it comes to me in the midst of the changing forms and creed of life, that love and faith and trust in God and Christlike living are eternally good, and that the interpretation of these to my own age, together with the handing of it down to other ages, depends somewhat upon me.

V. *The Kingdom Among Us.*

“The kingdom of heaven is within you.” It was a true, noble word. But more accurate is this: “The kingdom is among you.” There are some Christian privileges too sacred to belong to the individual apart from his fellows. It is only when we understand it “with all saints” that we know the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of God, which passeth individual knowledge. It is only thus that we are “filled with all the fulness of God.” It is not as a personal attainment, a cubit added to our individual stature by taking thought, that we come to the full height of Christian manhood. We must “*all* come, in the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God,” unto this state of perfect manhood, “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

“In the unity of the faith.” That reminds us that “these all died in faith,” and that the unity of which we are speaking includes their faith who lived and died before Christ came. And it is also

the unifying bond of our present effort. And now I begin to see how our lives together make up the mosaic which is to reveal the pattern of his face. "And ye are complete in him."

"I believe in the communion of saints." And thus I see how God is working, "that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are in earth," who is "the head of all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

VI. *Partakers of the Divine Nature.*

Do we lose thus our hope of personal righteousness? Nay, verily. We have never yet dared to think how much those Scripture promises imply that declare our oneness with Christ and our resulting privileges. Peter, writing to those that had obtained like precious faith with himself, but some of whom, though having faith, needed to add to it courage, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly

kindness, and love, assured them that it was not enough for them to have escaped "the corruption that is in the world through lust," but that the same "exceeding great and precious promises" which had made this possible enabled them also to "become partakers of the divine nature." The first verses of the twelfth chapter of Hebrews contain the same thought when they speak of Jesus, not only as the Author, but also the Finisher, the Initiator and the Perfecter, of our faith.

More than once we are assured that He who hath begun a good work in us will complete it. In the magnificent chapter which contains his philosophy of the universe, Paul tells us that we have received the spirit, not of bondage, but of sons, and that to be a son of God means to be a joint heir of Christ, that we and Christ may be glorified together. John has the same superb thought, and tells us that what we shall be doth not yet appear, but we know that we shall be like Christ. Nay, as a foretaste of this

and the assurance of it, "the earnest of it," Paul would say, we are told that "even now are we the sons of God," and thus heirs of the promises. I do not wonder when I find John adding that "every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." There I find what I am seeking in individual perfection.

VII. *God's Perfection and Ours.*

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." If the thought of perfection itself overwhelms me, what shall be said of this measure of it? What, indeed, save that, while it seems to us unattainable, any lower standard must seem to us unworthy of the striving of those who are made in God's image? Nay, for this we must strive, and, pitiable as are our failures, we dare not confess that the quest is hopeless. For, while the degree of that perfection shall be to us eternally unattainable, the quality of it cannot be hopeless to those who "with open face be-

holding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory unto glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

One of the wonders of the Centennial Exposition was the mighty Corliss engine, turning its acres of machinery, the greatest and most perfect engine that had been made at that time. One day a man approached it, and, taking from his vest-pocket a tiny box, removed something from it, and set it on the engine-bed. A group gathered about, but only those nearest could see. There was a miniature engine, whose base was a gold half-dollar, and the cover of its box a silver three-cent piece. The tiniest alcohol lamp furnished its power, and three drops of water filled its boiler. But it was a perfect steam-engine, and the kind of perfection which it had was the same as that of the great Corliss. It turned water into steam and steam into energy by the same principle, and, in direct proportion to its power, the energy derived was applicable to the same ends.

Such, I sometimes think, is to be our perfection as related to God's.

VIII. *The Value of This Truth as an Incentive.*

Now, when I realize the meaning of this, I feel a thrill to the inmost corner of my soul. I am not here as a thing to be tolerated. I am here to help God in his work of perfecting the world. I am here to strive to attain for myself the perfect ideal which God has set before me in Jesus Christ, and I am here also for the doing of a work which even God counts of value, a part of the very work of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is what I have been lacking in the way of motive. Perhaps my personal strivings for my own sake have been to some extent futile and a bit morbid. Perhaps I am now ready to realize that by saving my life I am in danger of losing it, as not a few people, I am constrained to believe, have been lost through their very salvation. But I am to save my life by losing it, and to attain my personal perfection by

adding my personal increment to the world's perfecting. This is something that appeals to all that is noble, courageous, chivalrous, within me. It takes religion out of the realm of tatting-work and five o'clock tea, and makes it elemental, practical, spiritual and eternal.

Once the men of a certain nation set out to choose a king. They agreed that the first man among them to see the sun should be the king, and long before the dawn they started toward the east to see it rise. All save one, who, feeling the greatness of the office, would not enter the scramble for it, but sat on the ground with his back to the east. So, while they pressed on toward the sunrise, and were yet in darkness, he looked up, and lo, he saw the sunlight, full and fair upon the top of the mountains, and cried, "I see it! I see it!" So sometimes are revealed to us the crowning truths of the spiritual life.

We need more introspection, more quiet, more meditation. This busy age has too little time for them. But we

also need incentive and momentum. We shall not get much out of self-castigation. We shall not get much out of self-seeking spiritual enjoyment. But if we come where God is, and into the mighty sweep of his eternal purpose for human life, we shall not lack for impulse in our quest of the good, and we shall find it in the conservation of an energy that is being eternally given out.

IX. *The Parable of the Shingles.*

Hear ye the parable of the shingles. A shingle is three times as long as the space it covers. It has for its first duty to cover its own little spot of roof, and do it well; its second duty is to complete the strip of equal width that is made by the courses below; and the next is to furnish a tight foundation for the courses above to be laid upon. Now, shingles are of different widths, even as one life has one talent, another two, and another five. And the lives of men adjoining one another in a given generation, and doing their work, some well and others with

knots and cracks, these are the shingles of a single course. And the generations mount slowly and steadily upward toward the ridge. And underneath are the rafters of God's eternal purposes. So may my life align itself with the good and the true of my own age, and be nailed fast to the eternal truths that are God's own! It is not my duty to hold up the roof; but there is one small spot upon it, whose length is measured by the years of my life, and whose breadth is made by my best effort: by the grace of God I will make that one spot secure!

X. *Life as a Relay Race.*

We have been studying the last verses of the eleventh of Hebrews, concerning the men who did well, but who without us are not made perfect. You have noticed how the next chapter begins, "Wherefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses." Who are those witnesses? They are those whose names he has been recalling, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and the rest. I

do not know that this text could be quoted to prove that saints in heaven know of our labor, but at least, by a startling and brilliant figure of speech, he makes all these whose perfection awaits our completing effort the witnesses of our performances. Just before the battle of the Pyramids, Napoleon, as you have often heard, addressed his army thus: "From yonder heights forty centuries look down upon you." What soldier would not have proved a hero with such a reminder? The centuries look down on you, my friend!

Happy as we all were to have our American boys win so many events at the re-establishment of the Greek games a few years ago, we were all glad that a young Greek won the Marathon race. It was long and hard, but O, how his heart must have leaped when he entered the arena where the whole nation past and present seemed gathered to behold his victory, where the élite of the present nation and the glory of ancient Greece looked down upon his success! And the

king's two sons leaped down, and, taking him by either arm, brought him up before the king, who cheered his splendid success.

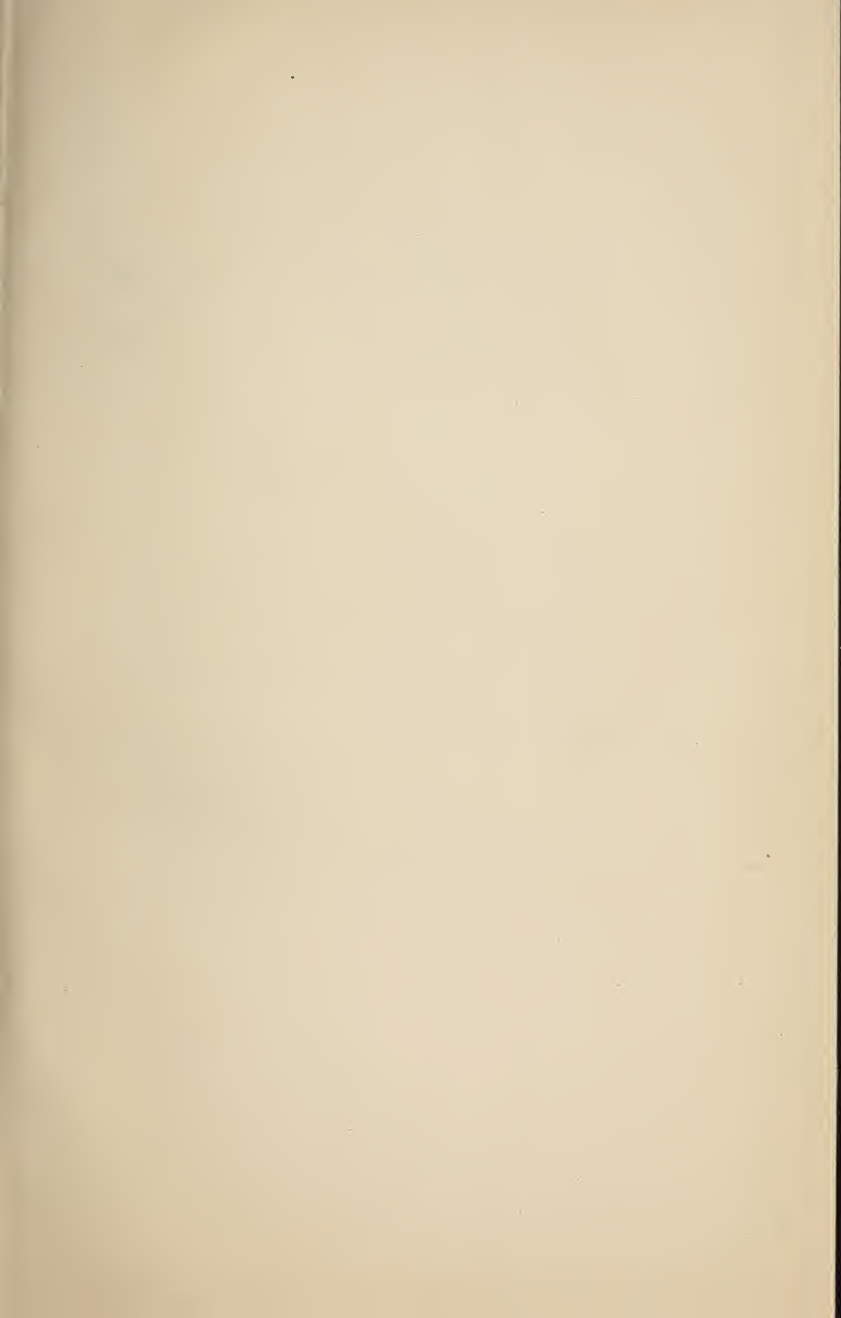
Life is a race. Paul says so. The author of this epistle says so. A thousand pulpits have said so. But neither Paul nor this author, had they lived to-day, would have gone past our modern athletics for figures derived from the ancient games of Corinth. So let me add to the Bible figure of the race, that life is a relay race. The runners of the past, these worthies in the eleventh of Hebrews, they are in the grand stand now. The pennant is in your hand; my young friend,—GO!

Yours is the inspiration of the present moment; all the enthusiasm of youth and courage and of present need are yours. Yours is the inspiration of the past and of the future also—GO!

The past has run with varying success, sometimes with courage and again with fear, but it has brought you the pennant,—bear it on! The past has borne it

through many generations, sometimes manfully, sometimes timidly, sometimes fiercely ; sometimes it has moved grandly on to the sound of martial music and the clash of arms ; sometimes it has been snatched from the flame that encircled the martyr's stake ; sometimes it has been swept on by the tide of missionary zeal ; sometimes it has moved slowly, weighted with the heavy cross, and amid the clank of chains ; sometimes its bearer has come up sobbing through Gethsemane, and again he has stood out resplendent in the glory of a dawn upon the mountain-crest which he has scaled in the night. By good work and ill, by duty performed and duty neglected, by heroism and tyranny, by mercy and cruelty, by devotion and by shame, the past has lived its life, and amid it all there have not failed those who have run their race, and borne onward the banner of the cross. It is in your hand to-day. Let not your progress be retarded by any weight of cherished sin. The centuries are looking. The expectant future, too, is waiting for your

effort. Christ himself looks down to see you run your course. Much depends on you to-day, my brother. O, gird up your loins, and bear your pennant high! Wherefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily trip us as we run, and let us run with loyalty and strength and zeal the race set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and the Perfecter of our faith.



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